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ABSTRACT

Literacy today has three challenges: greater diversity in the school population, newer media, and unwarranted intrusion from the outside world. To deal with greater student diversity, there should be greater differentiated instruction in teaching reading and writing; and to cope with the growing needs of students and teachers, principals are restructuring the school day, thus making an impact on literacy and the curriculum. A growing problem now affecting the teaching of reading and writing is the increasing number of under-qualified teachers. Because so much information is available in one new medium, the Internet, threats of censorship have increased. Pressure groups want the government to define "reading," and some school buildings are in disrepair. In the meantime, failure to learn to read has been reconceptualized as a problem of disability rather than a socio-economic disadvantage. What is accomplished when "new problems" such as attention deficit disorder are discovered in schoolchildren? Keeping language honest is one way to improve literacy that costs little and adds much to the value of education. Even the concept of literacy has broadened in today's society to include civic literacy, computer literacy, scientific literacy, visual literacy, among others. Improving literacy, however it is defined, will always remain a challenge. (Contains 13 references.) (NKA)

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Challenges to Literacy in Contemporary Society

Allen Berger

A Presentation at Utica College of Syracuse University

March 26, 1999

ED 428 392

With appreciation I thank all my professors at Utica College. I would especially like to single out Norman Nathan from whom I took every English course he taught: Shakespeare, 18th Century English, Romantic Literature, among others. He and I have kept in touch and at one point co-authored an article on teaching poetry, called The Building Blocks of Poetry, which appears in the National Council of Teachers of English publication *English Journal* (January 1971).

When I was a child growing up in West Utica, I didn't think much about literacy. I went to Kemble School, which is now gone, and Utica Free Academy, which is now closed. My father had a tailor shop on Oswego and Sunset, and while I was in high school I delivered clothes; the customers, and my friends on the street, were Polish, Italian, German, French, Irish--and the common language was English.

When I was a student at UFA, there were two thousand students; seven years later, when I returned to teach, there were 3,000 students in the same building.

We had an odd way of signing up for English books at that time in UFA. At the end of the first day of class, all twenty or so English teachers met in the office of the chair of the English Department. On the blackboards in her office were titles of books like *Silas Marner*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, etc. There were so many different book titles that they extended onto the blackboards in nearby classrooms. At a given moment, the chair of the

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English Department said, "Go!" and everyone ran to the blackboards into and out of rooms up and down the corridor (past startled, loitering students) to write their names next to the set of books they wanted for each month of the term.

I taught four ninth grade classes and one twelfth grade class. One of the writing assignments I asked the students to do that first year of teaching ended up as an article in a national education journal. The assignment was to write about how students and teachers should act to each other inside and outside the classroom.

As I was correcting the papers, I realized that the students were sharing a great deal of wisdom. So I wrote their comments down, with their unique spellings, organized everything into an article, and sent it to the educational journal,*The Clearing House*.

Here are some passages from the article:

> Surprising as it may seem, nearly all wanted their teachers to be strict. One began: "The stricter, the better. This should be the motto of every teacher." This particular student noted that he has ". . . had several 'lenient' teachers. They usually try to be your friend right off by giving you special privileges if you promise to be good. But when she gets mad and tries to lay down the law, what happens. The students pay no attention to her and all is wild and disorderly.

> Momentarily looking at what a teacher should *not* be, one youth urged teachers not to be "hard, mean, or soft," He defined "hard" as "giving too great an amount of homework." In

defining the two other terms, he said: "What I mean by being mean is, say, a boy in the class was talking out loud and the teacher told him to stop talking and the boy stop. Then five minutes later the boy started talking again. Then the teacher walk to the boy and pick him up out of his seat, throw him against the wall, and keep on yelling at him. That is what I mean by being mean to the students."

Other points mentioned include the importance of being fair and the need to have a sense of humor. Regarding humor, many suggested that a teacher should try to make his subject more interesting. "If he has a couple of jokes to go along with the subject," said one, "I think he will get better attention."

Relatively few students seemed to understand that a teacher often may be quite a "different" person outside the classroom. Of the more than one hundred writers, only three commented on this fact. Wrote one girl: "Teachers . . . are entirely different people when they leave school each night, for when teachers lock the door at night, they are locking part of themself in there, too. A teacher is not all teaching and books. . . ."

The same girl concluded her composition by stating that "the most important thing in forming a student-teacher relationship is for the student to remember that the teacher is a real person and will not shout at you each time you use poor English and for

the teacher to remember that the student is just a child at heart asking for a friendship."

-- *The Clearing House,* May 1961

Some things don't change. The ideas expressed by the UFA students four decades ago still apply today. Some topics are timeless. The current issue of *English Journal* (March 1999) is devoted to one of the topics mentioned by the students forty years ago--using humor in teaching English.

But other things do change.

Here are three challenges to literacy today.

- Greater diversity in the school population
- Newer media
- Unwarranted intrusion from the outside world

Greater Diversity in the School Population.

Throughout the United States there are more children coming to school who do not know English. Many children who do know English do not know it well. Some come from homes where there are no books or newspapers. There may be no one in the home who reads. (The common denominator of children who read is that there is an older person in the home who reads.) In addition, there are more poor children and, for most children, there is a connection between socio-economic level and reading scores. All these children are a major challenge to teachers of all grades. To help cope, there are intensive tutoring programs like Reading Recovery, which originated in New Zealand, and is now in many schools throughout

the United States. Another program is Teens for Literacy, which I began ten years ago in inner-city schools in southwestern Ohio and is now in many schools nationwide. With the cooperation of school principals teams of teens are formed and these student-teams figure out what to do to improve literacy and then implement their ideas in their schools and neighborhoods.

As a result of the greater diversity in students, there needs to be greater differentiated instruction in teaching reading and writing.

In every classroom there is, and has always been, at least a five-year spread in reading ability. A simple rule-of-thumb is 2/3 times the grade level is the minimum spread in reading ability. In teaching ninth grade, for example, 2/3 times nine means that there's at least a six-year reading spread. When I was teaching in Monroe High School in Rochester, I began tutoring a 12th grade student who was reading on the first grade level. We met during lunch time. He missed a lot of school in the first grade and didn't learn what he should have learned then. I also tutored a 12th grade student reading at the 3rd grade level. His parents were divorced when he was in third grade, and he probably was distracted. The main difference between then and now is that there are many more of these youngsters, making it more imperative that teachers know their reading levels, their strengths, and ways to build on their strengths to correct their weaknesses.

Teachers now are doing many things to help children in this regard--through peer tutoring, learning corners in which children use audio-tapes, videotapes, 1,000-minute reading clubs, breakfast reading clubs, etc.

To cope with the growing needs of students and teachers, principals are restructuring the school day thus making an impact on literacy and the curriculum. Instead of 40- or 50-minute periods in high school, more schools are moving into various forms of block scheduling. One usual form is

extending the length of class periods, sometimes doubling them. Another form is having a one-year course completed in half-a-year. Whatever forms are developed, the curriculum is affected; more time means more reading and writing and greater integration of the language arts into all areas of the curriculum. Students tend to have more personalized attention because teachers have fewer students at any given time.

The preparation of teachers is changing. In at least one way teacher-education has come full circle. I did not take any education courses during my undergraduate years at Utica College. I began to take them when I worked on my masters degree in Albany. During the last couple of decades, an increasing number of colleges of education have done away with undergraduate teacher education, requiring students to take liberal arts courses for their undergraduate degree, and then focusing on education courses for their masters degree. In a sense the rest of the education world has caught up with Utica College!

More states are requiring teachers and future teachers to take more courses in how to teach reading. Right now the State of Ohio requires four courses--one devoted to phonics and three other reading courses. Unfortunately, Ohio has explicitly stated that children's literature, adolescent literature, and language arts courses are *not* to be counted as reading education courses.

A growing problem now affecting the teaching of reading and writing as well as other subjects is the increasing number of under-qualified teachers. So serious is this problem that the National Council of Teachers of English, only four months ago in November, at their major annual convention passed a resolution, On Certification for All Teachers, opposing "the hiring or assigning of teachers to teach English language arts who have not fulfilled the

recognized guidelines for teacher preparation in English language arts as specified by the licensing/credentialing requirements of their states; that NCTE urge districts now employing non-licensed/certified teachers to facilitate teacher-preparation programs leading to state licensure/certification for those teachers; that NCTE recognize and promote efforts that recruit teachers (such as the NCTE program Teachers for the Dream and the CALTEACH program in California); that NCTE recognize and promote efforts that specifically recruit non-licensed/certified teachers into state-licensure/certification programs; and that NCTE and its affiliates continue to educate legislators, school officials, and the public about the complexities of teaching English language arts and the importance of professional preparation for English language arts teachers."

Related to this problem of the shortage of regular teachers is the drastic shortage of substitute teachers throughout the United States. What this means is that thousands of unqualified substitutes are hired each day. Some of these are good, and they include college students and parents. Many, however, have little knowledge of how to share their own knowledge with students of varying abilities and backgrounds.

The odd thing is that while states are increasing their standards for teachers, the opposite side of the coin is the relative lack of standards for teachers in the home-school movement. In Ohio, for example, all that is required is a high school education.

Newer Media.

When I was in grade school, there were none of the things that schools have now. We had movie projectors but no cable television, or VCR's or computers. Children today can and do engage in conversations with children

throughout the world. But children need to be taught to "read" what appears on TV, videotape and computers. Many schools now have Channel One in which children are exposed to ten minutes of news and two minutes of advertisements each day. Most children tune out both the news and the ads, although some teachers do use the opportunity to teach children how to detect propaganda in advertisements that they see and watch daily.

The newer media provide an onslaught of words and images that children need to know how to handle. Language is often downgraded. Opinions are presented as facts. Children now have to cope with web sites declaring that the Holocaust is a hoax. The distinction between news and entertainment is becoming increasingly blurred. Disney now owns ABC, and the news is presented entertainingly, and it's harder to tell what's fact and what's fiction. While we do a good job of teaching the reading and writing of fictional material, teaching the reading and writing of factual material is a greater challenge. In Ohio, children in grades 4, 6, 9, and 12 take a writing test. Whenever the children are asked to write a narrative or descriptive essay, they do far better than when they are asked to write exposition.

On the upside, by the way, there is an increase in e-mail and letter-writing as a result of the computer. Letter-writing was becoming a lost art: only 4 percent of mail are personal letters (with 80 percent being business mailings and the remaining 16 percent being greeting cards).

Because so much information is available on the internet, threats of censorship have increased. There has always been censorship. When I was a student in Kemble School and Utica Free Academy, not once was I told the origins of the city only 25 miles away, Oneida, which was established by the Rev. John Humphrey Noyes in the 1800's as a free love community, which evidently was the reason students were not told. It wasn't until years later

that I learned that these early residents of Oneida not only established one of the more unique communities in early America; they also built the famous silver industry now known as Oneida Community Silver, a product valued by many newly weds.

Nowadays censorship in one form or another has permeated education through print as well as the non-print media. Only last month I was helping the Ohio Department of Education with their soon-to-be-used reading test for tenth grade students; we were looking over passages, many of which were re-written. Why? Because in the original passages there were words that the testing companies felt had to be censored, words such as rabbi, priest, minister; even the word create is taboo.

The term whole language is so taboo and such a red flag that it is replaced by the phrase, the integrated approach to teaching language arts.

The censorship of school books is on a dramatic increase ever since the book-burnings in Kanawha County, West Virginia. In the 1970s, some reading materials, called *Interaction*, published by Houghton Mifflin, Publishing Company, were to be used in the schools. The *Interaction* series was composed of some 200 booklets containing stories, poems, essays, plays, letters, classics, and other writings. Some local residents charged that Jack and the Beanstalk encouraged stealing, a picture of two boys with their arms around each others' shoulders promoted homosexuality. Authors in the series including Edgar Allan Poe, Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Jack London, Benjamin Franklin, Sophocles, Cicero, Hans Christian Andersen, Roald Dahl--all banned for various reasons. The reaction--which included book-burnings and school-bombings--drew reporters from around the world to West Virginia.

What happened in Kanawha Country is described by James Moffett, author of the Interaction series, in an extraordinary book called *Storm in the Mountains*.

Some of these censoring groups are broadening their targets: they are not only aiming at school libraries but at larger public libraries throughout the United States.

For help and defense teachers can turn to organizations interested in intellectual freedom like the American Library Association, the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. From NCTE and IRA you can obtain recently published CD's containing student-written rationales for many books that attract censors.

Unwarranted Intrusion From the Outside World.

At one time a teacher could go into his or her classroom, close the door, and teach. That is not the case anymore. Now there are all sorts of outside influences that come into the classroom even with the doors closed.

One is *politics*. As bizarre as it may sound, there are groups now pressuring members of the United States Congress to define into law the word "reading." So powerful are these pressures that NCTE, at the same convention last year, passed another resolution, On Continued Government Intrusion Into Professional Decision Making, which states that . . . neither Congress nor any federal or state agency should establish a single definition of reading and writing or restrict the type of research used in funding criteria for preservice or inservice teacher education and professional development programs; that . . . neither Congress nor any federal or state agency should bypass professional standards and procedures for peer review of research . . . ; that no federal or state law or program be framed in such a way to provide

substantial advantage to any commercial reading or writing program. No person who could personally profit from any legislation or regulation should hold a staff position or be a paid consultant with the government agency that develops or monitors the legislation or regulation; that NCTE immediately distribute this resolution to members of the . . . full bodies of the U. S. Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as to state legislatures . . . [as well as] . . . federal and state education agencies. . . ."

(A third resolution, incidentally, was passed On Testing and Equitable Treatment of Students which affirms that no student should be retained "because of the results of standardized tests scores alone. . . .")

We don't have time to go into the political/religious quagmire of laws forbidding girls and women to go to school in Afghanistan and many other countries. But I do want to say that it is more important than ever to share our ideas with the public and policy-makers in state and federal governments. An article I've written recently on this topic appears in IRA's electronic journal, *Reading Online*, which you can reach through www.readingonline.org. Another article, "Writing About Reading for the Public," is the lead article in *The Reading Teacher* (September 1997).

Closely related to politics is *economics*. Last year I spent a couple hundred hours in two of the toughest inner-city schools in Cincinnati. While there, I shadowed, with permission, 7th and 8th grade students from the beginning to the end of school days. When I wasn't going from classroom to classroom with these children, I "hung out" in various classrooms in the schools. I met with individual teachers and with groups of teachers to listen and talk about education.

What did I learn in this school, whose parking-lot entrance requires knowledge of a four-digit code in order for the school door to open?

I learned that it was stifling hot on many days in August and September. But at the school I visited then, there was no air conditioning, and many of the windows could not be opened. The children were in classrooms where most of the clocks didn't work. Where many of the chairs and desks are broken. Where most of the books and materials are old and worn. Where only a handful of out-of-date computers are available in the library and a few other rooms. Where the wiring may not be up to date enough to support many computers. Where paint is peeling and ceilings look water-damaged.

I observed the good will, decency, and humor of children and teachers working in a building with rooms that are stifling hot in September and freezing in December. It was so cold one winter day that my hands were shaking as I turned the pages of an encyclopedia while students completed an assignment on biographies in the school library. Everyone was wearing coats. The wind blew in around the doors and windows. It was even worse in the art room. There, I actually shivered, and many of the students, some mumbling under their breath about the cold, wore hats and coats while painting and washing their hands in freezing water.

The U. S. General Accounting Office has reported that public schools buildings in Ohio are in the worst condition of all the schools in the United States. There is plenty of money for a multi-million dollar rock-and-roll museum in Cleveland, for two new multi-million dollar stadiums for the Cincinnati Reds and the Cincinnati Bengals. But virtually no money is available to fix the public schools in Ohio.

In one of the schools, incidentally, students were assigned to write a story--fiction or nonfiction--using several paragraphs. The teacher asked me if I would work with an eighth-grade boy. He was writing about what it

would be like to find $50,000 as he walked to the store to buy a loaf of bread for his mother. He had written the story in one paragraph.

As I was talking with him, I realized that he didn't know what a paragraph was. So I showed him some examples in magazines and newspapers.

He got very excited and started rewriting his story. In it, the boy turned in the money, which had been lost by the bank robbers. He was given a $10,000 reward, and he put $9,999 in the bank, leaving out a dollar to buy the bread. When we finished, he paid me a simple, touching compliment. He looked at me and said, "Are you going to be here tomorrow?" What was happening, of course, is that the young man was not so much overcoming his past failures; rather, he was achieving new successes.

Another illustration of how politics is in bed with economics is Ritalin. "An odd political alliance of more than 140 Republicans and Democrats . . . is supporting a petition that seeks to loosen the rules governing the prescription drug . . . Ritalin ("Reading, Writing and Ritalin," *The New York Times*, October 21, 1995)." In 1995, more than two million children--four times as many as in 1990, only five years previously--were on Ritalin. And the numbers are much higher today. The organization that is leading the fight to sell Ritalin over the counter is Children and Adults With Attention Deficit Disorder, which has more than 35,000 members and 650 chapters throughout North America. Instead of being an advocate for children, the organization is in reality a front for Ciba-Geigy, the manufacturer of Ritalin.

At one time, when a child had a reading or writing problem, it was said he had a reading or writing problem. Now it is said that he has a learning problem, or learning disabilities, or dyslexia, or attention deficit disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. I'm not suggesting that none of these

problems exist, but nowadays it seems that everyone has them. Money drives some of this loose use of language. The way the laws are set up, in many schools now the more children who are called learning disabled (instead of reading disabled), the more money comes to the schools.

Writing in IRA's *Reading Research Quarterly* (Fall 1987), Anne McGill-Franzen observes that "failure to learn to read has been reconceptualized as a problem of *disability* rather than socio-economic *disadvantage*." She points out that in one decade alone the number of students classified as learning disabled increased by 119 percent, whereas the number of disadvantaged students served in Chapter 1 compensatory programs decreased dramatically--from over eight million children to under five million children in one decade. Both groups of students, however, are characterized by the same types of problems with reading. The only difference is the language used to describe these students.

To add to the confusion, the American Psychiatric Association's new "bible," an 886-page book known as the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*, now lists three different kinds of attention deficit disorder--an illness, incidentally, that is still looking for a test! That same volume, by the way, lists as a mental disorder: "Disorder of Written Expression" (Code 315.2), which is revealed by poor grammar or punctuation, awful spelling, and bad handwriting. It also lists as a mental disorder "Oppositional Defiant Disorder" (Code 313.81), which describes children who frequently do "any four of the following eight things over a period of six months: lose their tempers, argue with adults, refuse to comply with adults' rules, annoy people, blame others for their misbehavior, or act touchy, angry or spiteful" ("Is Bad Writing a Mental Disorder?" *The New York Times*, June 20, 1994).

A consequence of this loose use of language is that failure to learn to read and write is now perceived as a physical or mental disability rather than an academic or socio-economic disadvantage. By using the jargon in vogue, we shift the source for academic problems away from the schools, away from the homes, and even away from the free will of children to some kind of mysterious flaw in their brains.

This shift in language means that everyone gets off the hook. It is not the children's fault if they can't read or forget their homework; they're dyslexic or learning disabled or have ADD or attention deficit *hyperactivity* disorder. Incidentally, remember the international incident involving the youngster from Kettering near Dayton, Ohio, charged, convicted and flogged for vandalizing cars in Singapore? Do you recall part of his defense? Attention deficit disorder!

Some even claim that children can't read because of hypoglycemia, an abnormal decrease of sugar in the blood. For those unfamiliar with hypoglycemia, the operative word is *abnormal* decrease of sugar. The amount of sugar in our blood fluctuates throughout the day. After a meal, the sugar goes up--(that's normal)--then our pancreas sends out insulin and the sugar goes down. Once in a while the pancreas shoots out too much insulin and the sugar goes down dramatically. But then the body kicks in with hormones to produce enough sugar. When children, or adults, are tested after the pancreas sends out insulin to lower the sugar in the blood stream--(for example, after a sugar-loaded breakfast)--there may be a false diagnosis. And based upon this false diagnosis, parents may be told that their child has a reading problem owing to hypoglycemia, which in its true form is about as rare as dyslexia is in its true form.

Fortunately, blaming hypoglycemia for reading problems is going the way of crawling and creeping and patterning that was popular as a way of improving reading ability a few decades ago. If you don't recall crawling and creeping, in a nutshell claims were made by two people in particular--Glenn Doman and Carl Delacato--which resulted in grown-up men and women as well as boys and girls crawling and creeping on gym floors with the belief that they would become better readers. Let's hope that claims about hypoglycemia and other such ailments will crawl away also.

In short, with the use of misleading language and bizarre notions, neither the schools nor the parents are to blame if children can't read or write. It's nobody's fault because there supposedly is something the matter with their brains.

Suddenly, there are millions of children who have something the matter with their brains. Remarkably, not too long ago when the definition of learning disabilities moved from one standard deviation to two standard deviations away from the mean average of a given test, thousands of learning-disabled children were cured overnight.

Recently, CBS News announced that 25 million people in the United States cannot read because they have learning disabilities, and millions more cannot read because they have dyslexia. At the same time we are told that millions more people in the United States do not read or write English because they do not know it. In a poignant television film, a college student is told that he reads at the fourth-grade level and that there are 21 million others like him. Ninety pecent of the more than million prisoners in the United States cannot read, we are told, for a variety of reasons. Jonathan Kozol, the author of *Death at an Early Age* and *Savage Inequalities* and

Amazing Grace, and other books, has said that 60 million adults in the United States are illiterate.

If my arithmetic is correct, and there are not too many crossovers, it seems that there are only three people in the United States who can read and write English.

In no way do I wish to minimize the problem. Vast numbers of people cannot read or write well enough to cope in our increasingly technical world. Even if only one person were illiterate, that would be a shame. And some of these drugs do help some children.

My concern here is with overprescribing and mislabeling. If Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer went to school today, they might be on Ritalin ("The Debilitating Malady Called Boyhood," *The New York Times*, July 24, 1994). Some schools simply line up children for their "medicine" with no concern for the different effects of the drugs before and after puberty. The first thing I would do before giving drugs to a child is check his or her diet--and focus on cutting down on sugar and junk food.

What are the practical consequences of tossing around figures and words so carelessly? What do we accomplish when so-called new problems such as attention deficit disorder are discovered in schoolchildren? Chapters for ADD have formed all over the U. S. to fight this fast-spreading epidemic, which some people claim affects no less than 20 percent of the population of North America.

In large part, what we accomplish is the creation of programs "costing taxpayers billions each year," as noted on the cover of the December 13, 1993, issue of *U. S. News & World Report*. There are many ways to improve literacy, and keeping language honest is one way that costs little and adds much to the value of education.

In a sense there is no such thing as an educational issue. What we call issues, or arguments, tend to be either political, social, economic, or religious. Education is the battleground.

Putting the Challenges to Literacy in Perspective

It's hard for the ordinary citizen and law-maker to know what's going on because of the *misleading information about literacy in our media.* For example, syndicated columnist Joan Beck wrote recently that "every study comparing the academic levels of children in industrialized nations shows American youngsters last, or close to last." But a literacy study of 32 countries conducted by the International Association of the Evaluation of Educational Achievement has shown that U. S. 9-year-olds and 14-year-olds scored near the top. In reading comprehension the 9-year-olds in the U. S. were second out of all the countries; first was Finland. In a world mathematics competition (and math is of course a language) held in Hong Kong, six American public school students astonished the judges by achieving a perfect score on a nine-hour examination.

Another syndicated columnist, Walter Williams, recently began one of his columns with this sentence: "According to the National Right to Read Foundation, last year, the National Adult Literacy Survey reported that among adults with 12 years of schooling, over 96 percent couldn't read, write, and compute well enough to attend college." He continued: "In 1990, 40 million young Americans with nine to 12 years of schooling could not make sense out of a printed page. Only 56 percent of blacks over the age of 14 could read."

These are incredible statistics. Where did they come from? The National Right to Read Foundation. This is the same so-called foundation

that praises Hooked on Phonics, which recently agreed to quit making unsubstantiated and misleading claims about learning to read after an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission. The TV newsmagazine *Dateline* reported that, according to the foundation's tax return a couple years ago, most of its income was from Hooked on Phonics. *Dateline* also reported that the national foundation's "Suite 174" was nothing more than a box for mail collection.

What I find dismaying is the carelessness and misinformation provided by many syndicated columnists appearing in newspapers throughout the nation. Some reporters confuse whole language, a way of improving literacy, with whole word, a way of teaching reading that hasn't been used for decades. Phonics is looked upon as an enemy of whole language when, in truth, these two ways of teaching reading can and are being used together successfully. The carelessness and misinformation is dismaying because, as George Orwell pointed out, one of the many dangers to democracy is the corruption of language. Fortunately, English and language arts teachers on all levels are on the front lines fighting for literacy and, through literacy, democracy. Fortunately, "most states" moved upward in the reading scores of children in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, according to a report in *USA Today* earlier this month. The state-by-state report card released this month "shows that students on average are reading somewhat better than they did four years ago," according to *U. S. News & World Report*. The state-by-state report card of average reading scores of fourth-graders shows that New York State has moved above the average for the United States.

Thinking back to being a student in Kemble School, I remember an incident involving a boy named Gordon.

One day Gordon walked silently out of the classroom, and into the hall, and slowly proceeded to smash the tightly screwed coat hooks off the wall, one by one, until his bare fist was bloody. Gordon was a quiet sort of boy. We were seated according to the marks we made on our last report card. Gordon sat in the last seat in the last row next to the radiator.

The seats we sat in were bolted to the floor. Gordon could see the backs of everyone's head. Those who sat in the front seat could examine the cracks on the blackboard.

Once in a while Gordon would raise his hand and wave his arm, but the teacher always called on somebody else. Sometimes I wondered if the teacher couldn't remember his name, or if he was hard to see in the back of the room, or if he was just forgotten.

One day, though, in English class in seventh grade we were "learning" poetry. The whole class had to memorize "Trees"--we had to know the jargon and even the punctuation marks as Joyce Kilmer or his printer recorded them.

We were startled when the teacher called Gordon to go to the blackboard and write the first two lines. He made the long walk from the back of the room and slowly wrote those indelible lines, misspelling the word poem.

"What's that you spelled?"

"Poem," said Gordon, a little sheepishly.

"That is not poem! That is peom! PEom you've got there. The word is poem. POem. Write it correctly!"

Gordon wrote it correctly.

That happened in seventh grade. Toward the end of eighth grade Gordon learned that he would not be going on to high school with his friends. He had failed! It was then that he made his attack on the symbolic coat hooks.

There have been many changes over the years, and one of the more subtle changes relates to the coat hooks that used to protrude from the walls into the corridors. They are gone in most schools now. What this means is that if we are not successful in reaching all children, if we do not give them a decent, safe, and friendly place in which to learn to read and write, the Gordons of the world will find--and many are finding--other ways of releasing their pent-up rage and silent violence after years and years of neglect, indignity, and mutilation.

It's hard for children to improve their own education because, until they're eighteen, children don't vote and children don't own much legally: the main thing children own is their language, which they cherish.

Fortunately, school and classroom practices are evolving for the better. They are not quite so dehumanizing. Teachers no longer have to run through corridors to sign up for books. The curriculum contains more stories of interest to both boys and girls as well as to people of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. There are many teachers today who, with classroom lights low, tap into children's language and make a happening out of reading and writing poetry. We ask less often what did the poet or author mean and more often what does the poet or author mean to you. Book reports have been

replaced by multi-media responses to literature. To explore what they need to know, more students are doing I-search papers for which they engage in interviews on a topic that grabs their interest. Reading and writing and spelling are not taught separately but now they are taught in a connected manner often in concert with listening and speaking. Teachers and principals not only use the findings of research in their classrooms and schools; they are often ahead of researchers who come and confirm the successes of these imaginative and courageous teachers and administrators.

Even the concept of literacy has broadened in today's society to include civic literacy, computer literacy, scientific literacy, visual literacy, among others. But the bedrock of all these literacies remains reading and writing and a command of language. Improving literacy, however we define it, will always remain a challenge. For as we grow, literacy demands grow. The simple act of reading, for example, is not so simple: Mortimer Adler, in his book, *How to Read a Book*, expresses the view that no one reads except when he or she receives a love letter. Another way to look at it all is the way Goethe, the great German philosopher, looked at reading when he was in his eighties: "The dear people do not know how long it takes to learn to read. I have been at it all my life and I cannot yet say I have reached the goal."

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